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We are all the people of the *Vega Baja* now

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Immediate Struggles: People, Power, and Place in Rural Spain

By Susanna Narotzky and Gavin Smith (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 2006,250 pp)

For a while in modern European history, urban worker protest milieus had almost by definition been dependent on the involvement of two special types of worker-intellectuals. The first was the journeyman printer; the second the artisan in the shoemakers' trade. The latter was commemorated by Hobsbawm and Scott as the "political shoemakers" (1984). Political shoemakers were a particular nineteenth-century breed of urban artisans, with much independent control over their means of production, a proclivity for reading and conversation, and a peculiar air of radical republicanism that shaped a working-class urban public sphere of cafés, bistros, reading societies, underground circulations, and associations. That air sprang from their reading habit and their autonomy, but also from their gradual loss of control over the conditions of their trade and life. Throughout the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, entrepreneurs all over "advanced" Europe were shifting shoe production out of the older urban centers into emergent rural agglomerations unaffected by political regulations or working class organization. The manufacturing agglomerations that emerged—Northampton in the UK, Pirmasens in Germany, the *Langstraat* in the Netherlands—surely were places with surprisingly bristling popular cultures, but within them the fight for the public sphere of the political shoemakers had given way to bread-and-butter unionism, defensive fights over gender and the exploitation of mothers and daughters, and the desire of core workers, often unionists or shop stewards, to escape downward pressures and become entrepreneurs themselves (Kalb 1997). From the 1950s onwards, these northwestern centers were themselves dismantled in another round of relocations to new peripheral sites in the Mediterranean area. In the new locations, similar

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pressures on labor emerged immediately: homework, women's work, long hours, and "entrepreneurial workers." New rounds of dislocations to spaces with even less worker protections threatened local livelihoods further, first in the backyards of the same region, then in eastern Europe, Vietnam, and China.

With their magnificent historical ethnography of the *Vega Baja*, near Alicante, Spain, Susana Narotzky and Gavin Smith help us to explain in a much more relationally saturated way why shoemaking populations would never again match the hold over a radical public life that Hobsbawm's shoemaker-intellectuals once exerted. It was not just the rural location itself, disconnected from an urban public sphere, nor the widespread use of homework and the pressures toward self-exploitation, although all of that was of significance. But superimposed on such objective tendencies ("concrete abstractions," in Narotzky and Smith's vocabulary) were regional histories, like that of the Vega Baja, of bloody political violence, fascism, and local *cacique* rule. The Spanish Civil War and *Francismo*—and the private memories imprinted by them—had destroyed any popular hope of the possibility of a civic public sphere; a radical lack of trust made people vulnerable to vertical dependencies and clientelism and predisposed them for out-migration rather than for public politics and open claim-making. Memories of violence would instigate a proud and self-protective silence. People would vote with their eyes or with their feet rather than with what Alfred Hirschman called "voice."

Subsequently, in Spain, the pacted transition out of *Francismo* and into the increasingly neoliberal corporatism of the European Union had explicitly equated democracy with peace and compromise rather than with mobilization and confrontation. Thus, chances of the emergence of a public sphere where contradictions and conflict could be named and acted out declined further. The Vega Baja became a lean and mean shoe exporter to the German market because popular activism and public claims to social and worker rights had first been stamped out by fascists and subsequently faded out by corporatist technocrats.

With this sharp vision, the authors put flesh on their claim that current anthropologists of Europe have neglected the study of social reproduction under the conditions of globalized capitalism. No doubt indeed that the anthropology of Europe has neglected class. They also push that claim back in time by discussing how an earlier Anglo-Saxon anthropology of the Mediterranean—Pitt Rivers, Davis—got focused on issues of honor without seeing how concepts of honorability and respectability were in fact the object of fierce cultural struggle between and among classes.

Three more important sub-themes run through the book as it discusses the always too narrow space for public/civic life in the Vega Baja. The first of them is that the export success of a region such as this, with its "useful" obstacles for organic intellectuals, had always also been predicated on the fact that the district never developed a strong economic coherence nor any political center and therefore no coherent politics among its elite of bureaucrats, landowners, and larger entrepreneurs. Fragmentation among elites, Narotzky and Smith imply, further thwarted popular political cohesion. This ultimately closed down the sheer possibility of "a public" itself, including the vision of a public good. There is something of more general validity here: labor-intensive industries have historically often settled in

such "in between" regions with scattered populations and disunited elites that are low on public sphere and high on self-exploitation (see Kalb 1997). Labor-intensive production and a "labor-extensive" public sphere have a general elective affinity.

To this historical institutional characteristic of the Vega Baja, Narotzky and Smith add two magnificently perceptive contemporary points about EU governance and the "pacification" of the public. Local bureaucrats and researchers in the Vega Baja have recently begun to mobilize the repertoire of "regional economy" and "social capital" offered by the European Union in order to tap subsidies from Brussels and Madrid. By so doing, however, potential organic intellectuals metamorphose willy-nilly into corporatist technocrats and policy researchers, thus further reducing the possibility of articulating key concerns of local labor in a voice untainted by the governance discourses of political elites. The example of "the one socialist researcher" who in the mid-eighties gave Gavin Smith a paper to read on homework and excessive hours and who would give him a new copy of the same paper in the mid-nineties, now entirely framed in the celebratory language of regional economy, social capital, flexibility, and entrepreneurial attitudes is stunning. At this point, Narotzky and Smith turn their historical ethnography of place and people into a deeply enlightening exercise in "studying through" the layers of EU social governance without losing any critical local edge at all—on the contrary. This is a powerful illustration of how to study EU formation or expanded global capitalism without giving up on localized ethnography, as so much globalization-oriented research in anthropology ends up doing. A similar feat occurs when they study the discrepancies between the bleak cultural policies ("modernity," "Europe") of the local (and national) social democrats in Spain and a notion of culture inspired by Raymond Williams' idea of militant particularism. Mass "events" and "modern leisure centers" have substituted for a potentially participative local public sphere that could help people make sense of their own histories and interests.

Throughout the book, the authors show themselves keenly aware that none of this is really peculiar to the Vega Baja. For anthropological theory and method, Narotzky and Smith tell us that the key issue will be how to combine a firm grasp of local conditions with an effort at throwing the analytic net further and wider.[1] In this sense, this fantastic ethnography offers dozens of productive starting points for theorizing more explicitly about European and capitalist history generally. Anthropology would gain from picking up such points more systematically and incorporating more comparison to contribute to overall theory formation (McMichael 1990, Gingrich and Fox 2002). As I have tried to show in this review, we can talk about the Vega Baja not only as a "mere place and people" but also as a chapter in the history of a particular segment of industrial capitalism, a chapter that is ethnographically and historically researchable and which can help to frame fresh hypotheses and generate cumulative insights into the social and cultural dynamics of the manufacturing export regions that are increasingly becoming the paradigm for regional development outside the

[1] Narotzky and Smith have discussed analytical themes that emerged from their study of the Vega Baja in two subsequent debate sections in Current Anthropology, one on "industrial regions" (Smith 2006) and one on "social capital" (Narotzky 2007).

metropoles. The destruction of public trust by histories of open violence or aggressive hierarchy (much of Eurasia before communism and in a different way again during communism), the undermining of potential popular contention by corporatist technocracies and imposed neoliberal hegemonies, and the alienation of working classes from "Europe" or "globalization," all stark features of the Vega Baja, are in fact conditions by which whole industrial regions in western Europe, eastern Europe, Asia, and elsewhere are now saturated. Narotzky and Smith are admirably aware of this. I do not think they were very surprised at seeing the recent "no" votes against further EU integration in France and the Netherlands, or the just 17 percent turnout for the last EU elections in Slovakia and other places in Central Europe, even though they "benefited" so much from their accession, as the official story goes.

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